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ABSTRACT

This paper describes three national studies on factors relating to successful special education interdistrict cooperatives. Interdistrict cooperatives are formal organizations between state departments of education and school districts to share costs and resources in implementing programs for participating school districts. The first study provided descriptive data about the cooperatives and found that governance structure had no impact on the cooperatives' effectiveness. The second study investigated the contents of the governance guidelines and found that two characteristics were statistically significant: (1) state education agency approval of operational procedures prior to establishment; and (2) ability of cooperatives to function independently of state education agencies. The third study investigated the 16 states that reported having cooperatives that were self-governed by the member districts. Seventy percent of the 350 chairpersons of the cooperatives' governing boards responded to a survey. The findings suggest that managerial and organizational factors are more likely to distinguish between effective and ineffective cooperatives than governance or demographic factors. Breakdown of cooperatives by state and recommended operational guidelines are included in the tables. (LP)

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Factors Related to the Successful Operation of Special Education Interdistrict Cooperatives

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FACTORS RELATED TO THE SUCCESSFUL OPERATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION INTERDISTRICT COOPERATIVES

RC 018521

ABSTRACT

A series of three national studies were conducted to determine which factors (governance, demographic, managerial and organizational) distinguish between special education interdistrict cooperatives which are perceived as successful or very effective and interdistrict cooperatives which are perceived less favorably by State Education Agencies and member/ consumer districts. The findings suggest that managerial and organizational factors are more likely to distinguish between the two groups than governance or demographic factors.

Interdistrict Cooperatives

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has tried to operate cooperative services between and among districts can cite the litany of concerns that are shared among administrators and policy makers brave enough or needy enough to assume the task. These concerns comprise what we have labeled "assumptions." Assumptions about what makes effective cooperatives:

1. Don't have too many members.
2. Don't be too large geographically.
3. Don't take on too much.
4. You need to be legislated or it will fall apart.
5. You need to be able to employ staff and offer benefits.

And the list goes on.

It was assumptions such as these that we investigated in our series of three national studies beginning in October 1977 and terminating this February 1991. From these studies we have gained insight about which governance structures, demographic factors, managerial factors, and organizational factors distinguish between interdistrict cooperatives perceived as "very effective" and cooperatives perceived as "less effective."

BACKGROUND

A series of three studies were conducted from 1987 to 1990. The first study investigated the status of cooperatives [collaboratives] in the United States. Of the 36 out of 50 states reporting interdistrict collaboratives, 21 states (42%) reported having Intermediate Education Units (IEUs) or Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES); 9 (18%) reported other legislated cooperatives which were neither IEUs or BOCEs; another 6 (12%) reported State Board of Education regulated cooperatives; while 8 (16%) states reported other than state-wide systems. Other state-wide systems included cooperatives which occurred through joint applications for federal funds or through contracts. Six states (12%) reported no formalized state authorized systems (Table 1) (Fletcher, Cole & Strumor, 1990).

TABLE 1

TYPE OF AUTHORIZATION FOR LEA COLLABORATIVES BY STATE

1 State	2 Legislate IEU's BOCES	3 Legislate Systems Other Than IEU's/BOCES	4 SBE Regulated Coop	5 Other Systems (State Plan)	6 No State Guidelines	1 State	2 Legislate IEU's BOCES	3 Legislate Systems Other Than IEU's/BOCES	4 SBE Regulated Coop	5 Other Systems (State Plan)	6 No State Guidelines
AL					Yes	MT				Yes	
AK				Yes		NE		Yes			
AZ				Yes		NV				Yes	
AR			Yes			NH		Yes			
CA	Yes					NJ	Yes				
CO	Yes					NM			Yes		
CT	Yes					NY	Yes				
DE				Yes		NC			Yes		
FL		Yes				ND	Yes				
GA			Yes			OH				Yes	
HI					Yes	OK	Yes	Yes			
ID		Yes				OR	Yes				
IL		Yes				PA	Yes				
IN	Yes					RI	Yes				
IA	Yes					SC		Yes			
KS					Yes	SD	Yes				Yes
KY	Yes					TN	Yes				
LA			Yes			TX	Yes				
ME					Yes	UT				Yes	
MD	Yes					VT	Yes				
MA	Yes					VA			Yes		
MI				Yes		WA	Yes				
MN	Yes					WV		Yes			
MS						WI	Yes				
MO	Yes					WY					
							21	9	6	8	6

Satisfaction with State-wide Governance Systems

In addition to gathering descriptive data on the 50 states, we asked the State-Education-Agency representatives to indicate their level of satisfaction with their representative state-wide systems in order to determine whether there is a relationship between types of governance systems and level of satisfaction with the collaboration/cooperation between and among districts. "Satisfaction" was based on the ability of the cooperatives to assist member districts comply with Pub. Law 94-142.

We found that "no single governance system for interdistrict collaboration [cooperation] emerges as the panacea for ...states seeking to satisfactorily meet the requirements of Pub. Law 94-142" (Fletcher et al., 1990, p. 15).

What this means, then, is that states may choose any governance/administrative structure that they feel appropriate. However, it will not be the governance structure that makes the cooperative work.

Components of the Governance Guidelines

In the second study we investigated the contents of the governance guidelines. Are there certain components of guidelines that distinguish between cooperatives perceived as "very satisfactory" and those perceived as "less satisfactory" by their SEAs? Based on the open-ended items on the initial census, we developed a follow-up questionnaire which contained 12 characteristics that the SEAs had identified as "making their cooperatives work satisfactorily."

Findings

Two characteristics were statistically significant: (a) SEA approves operational procedures of cooperatives prior to establishment and (b) cooperatives function on a single, primary funding base so that local contributions are in addition to the primary revenue base.

Further Research Needed

Two other characteristics were identified for further study: (a) ability of cooperatives to directly employ staff and (b) ability of cooperatives to function independent of state guidelines.

Demographic, Managerial, and Operational Factors

Based on the recommendations of the second study (i.e., need for further research into SEA approval of operational guideline and ability of cooperatives to work independent of SEAs) a third study was designed. This study was designed to look at the operation of cooperatives from the perspective of member districts.

NATIONAL SURVEY OF 350 INTERDISTRICT COOPERATIVES

So as not to compare apples and oranges, two key definitions guided the third study: "interdistrict cooperatives/collaboratives" and "effective interdistrict collaboratives." The definition for interdistrict cooperatives is a combination of definitions from research by Baugh (1987) Fletcher et al., (1988, 1990) and McKibbin (1981). The term for effective interdistrict collaboratives/cooperatives is from work by Cates (1983).

Definitions

Interdistrict cooperatives. Interdistrict collaboratives [cooperatives] are defined as "formal educational organizations, between the state-education-agency level and the local-education-agency level, enabled or mandated by the State for the purpose of sharing costs and services between or among autonomous districts and designed to provide participating districts with joint responsibility for administering and implementing programs.

Effective interdistrict cooperatives. Effective interdistrict cooperatives means that member districts, through formal collaboration, increase their power to act and to achieve their individual and collective goals.

Selection of Subjects

The third study was narrowed, first, to the 37 predominantly rural states, then to the 16 states that have state mandated or enabled systems of interdistrict cooperatives in which governance-systems allow for the self-governance of the cooperatives by the member districts (Fletcher et al, 1988).

Units of analysis. The State Education Agencies in the 16 states were contacted for listings of the interdistrict cooperatives in their states. A total of 350 interdistrict cooperatives were operating in the 16 states as of March 1990 (Table 2).

Table 2

Number of Interdistrict Cooperatives by State

State	Number	State	Number
California	76	New York	41
Colorado	14	North Dakota	23
Kansas	18	South Dakota	10
Maine	3	Vermont	7
Michigan	55	Virginia	9
Nebraska	17	West Virginia	9
New Hampshire	44	Wisconsin	12
New Mexico	10	Wyoming	3
		TOTAL	350

We note that some states have more cooperatives than are listed, but two groups were excluded: (a) cooperatives serving a single district (i.e., intradistrict cooperatives) and (b) cooperatives that in which smaller districts are "satellites" to larger districts and receive services, but do not participate in the administration of the cooperative.

Sampling units. We did not want a self evaluation of the cooperatives, so we did not select the directors of the cooperatives to respond. Instead, we selected the chairpersons of the cooperatives' governing boards or their designees to serve as the sampling units or respondents to the survey. Respondents were either district superintendents (19%) or other central-office administrators (81%).

Response Rate

A 70 percent rate of response was received from the targeted sampling units. To assure that this was a representative sample, a sampling of the "non-respondents" was also conducted. Findings suggest that there were no significant differences between the groups that would suggest that the findings of the study would be different had a higher rate of response been received.

Summary of Results and Discussion

The third study concentrated on three areas of investigation: (a) demographics of cooperatives and their member districts, (b) managerial factors and (c) operational factors. Results of the three sets of questions identify the factors which distinguish between interdistrict cooperatives which are perceived as "very effective" by member/consumer districts and those which are perceived as "less effective" which includes categories of "somewhat effective", "not very effective" and "not at all effective."

Demographic Attributes

Factors investigated. We investigated (a) the location of cooperatives by home state; (b) geographic area covered in square miles;(c) the purpose of collaboration--single or multi purpose; (d) the number of counties and districts served; and (e) the rural nature of the districts served (Demers, 1981; Helge, 1984; Hord, 1980; Silver, 1987).

Findings. We found that there are no significant differences on demographic variables between cooperatives perceived as very effective and those perceived as less effective except for "purpose of collaboration." Cooperatives which serve a multi-purpose for their member districts (e.g., special education and vocational, regular education, media services) tend to be perceived as more effective than cooperatives which have the single purpose of providing special education services.

Managerial Attributes

Factors investigated. Managerial factors address the direction, control, and influence of the use of shared resources of the cooperative (Cates, 1983) and include a) personnel practices, (b) leadership provided, and (c) fiscal management practices as follows:

1. Personnel practices-- Do staff have clearly defined roles and responsibilities? Do cooperatives employ staff directly and, if so, are employees afforded salary benefit packages similar to those offered to professional staff of member districts?

2. Leadership--What proportion of leadership is provided to member districts in the conduct of (a) needs assessments, (b) public relations campaigns, (c) long-range planning, and (d) inservice training?

3. Fiscal management--What are the prevalent practices including: (a) Leadership and technical efforts in seeking new revenue sources; (b) cost-analysis information regarding services provided (i.e., cost-benefits, cost-containment, and cost-economy); (c) cost options for new versus continuing services; and (d) commitment of non-federal funds to the cooperative effort by the membership?

Findings. Managerial factors are clearly part of the internal characteristics which distinguish between interdistrict cooperatives perceived as "very effective" by member districts and those perceived as "less effective."

1. Personnel practices--Cooperatives tend to be perceived more effectively as the proportion of their staffs which have clearly defined roles and responsibilities increase. Interdistrict cooperatives that are perceived as "very effective" have greater than 76% of their staffs with specified roles and responsibilities that have been communicated to members. However, there are no significant differences between very effective and less effective cooperatives regarding their capacities to (a) employ staff directly or (b) provide comparable benefit packages.

2. Leadership--Cooperatives perceived as very effective tend to provide more than 50% of the leadership in (a) needs assessments, (b) public relations campaigns, (c) long-range planning, and (d) inservice training on behalf of their member districts. The mean number of inservice events were not different between the two groups and did not distinguish between cooperatives perceived as very effective and those perceived as less effective.

3. Funds management factors are also characteristics that distinguish between cooperatives perceived as very effective and those perceived as less effective by member districts.

   (a) Very effective districts tend to communicate information to their membership regarding shared resources more than do cooperatives perceived as less effective.

   (b) Very effective cooperatives tend to provide information to their membership about (1) the human and fiscal costs of the collaborative effort, (2) the level of fiscal resources needed to maintain the same

or additional program outcomes, (3) the unit cost of jointly sharing costs of collective, aggregated services, and (4) cost options available for new versus continuing programs.

(c) Addressing the commitment of resources to the cooperative efforts, very effective cooperatives tend to receive non-federal revenues from their member districts more often than less effective cooperatives receive non-federal contributions. However, the non-federal revenues need not remain at a consistent level from one year to the next.

Organizational Attributes

Factors investigated. Organizational factors address the process and manner in which autonomous districts form into a collaborative with other districts with interdependent and coordinated parts (Cates, 1983) and include: (a) the role of the governing boards, (b) flexibility of operational procedures, (c) awareness of benefits, and (d) outcomes of membership:

Findings. All organizational factors were found to distinguish between cooperatives perceived as very effective and those perceived as less effective.

1. Governing Boards of cooperatives perceived as very effective tend to have a high level of involvement and act publicly on all major decisions effecting the cooperative.

2. Members of very effective interdistrict cooperatives have strong feelings of mutual ownership of the collaborative effort and perceive the organizational guidelines as flexible and responsive to the changing goals and objectives of the members.

3. Member districts of cooperatives perceived as very effective are very aware of the benefits of membership, and find that their continued commitment of member districts' human and fiscal resources to the collaborative efforts are justified by their increased capacity to act and to achieve their individual and collective goals.

4. Outcomes of membership reported by members of cooperatives perceived as very effective include a much (a) increased capacity for providing direct services, (b) increased access to products and services not otherwise readily available, (c) increased access to a larger pool of resources within

the cooperative and (d) increased linkages with relevant resources brokered by the cooperative on their behalf.

Summary

Clearly the preponderance of factors that distinguish between interdistrict cooperatives that are perceived as "very effective" and those perceived as "less effective" lie within the purview of the operational guidelines and administrative practices of cooperatives and not in outside governance structures or demographics. The one demographic factor that tends to distinguish between (a) very effective and (b) less effective cooperatives is "purpose for collaboration" which may be more an organizational factor than a demographic one.

Recommendations

Results from the third study can be the basis for recommending preferred components of operational guidelines for interdistrict cooperatives whether such cooperatives are established as IEUs, BOCES, or some other administrative structure and whether these operational guidelines are approved at the SEA level or developed independently from the SEAs (Table 3).

Administrators of interdistrict cooperatives and policy makers are encouraged to review the internal workings and capabilities of staff when looking to improve the effectiveness of interdistrict collaborative efforts before dissolving or drastically changing the governance process of existing cooperatives.

As we have come to believe--Cooperatives are like a good soup...

"It's not what you call it.
It's what's in it."

Table 3

Recommended Components of Operational Guidelines for the Governance of Interdistrict Cooperatives

Purpose for Collaboration

1. Encourage multi-purpose collaboratives.
2. Assure flexibility to accommodate changing goals and objectives of member districts.

Governing Boards

1. Representative membership.
2. Capacity to make shared decisions controlling the activities of the collaboratives.

Collaborative Staff Members

1. Leadership capabilities in personnel development.
2. Leadership capabilities in long-range planning.
3. Leadership capabilities in conducting needs assessments.
4. Leadership capabilities in conducting public relations campaigns.
5. Leadership and technical assistance capabilities in acquiring new funds.
6. Clearly defined and communicated roles and responsibilities.

Funds Management

1. Procedures for receipt of local contributions.
2. Methods for compiling and reporting cost analysis data to member districts including:
   a. cost-benefits
   b. cost-containment
   c. cost economy
   d. cost alternatives for start-up vs. continuing programs.

Program Documentation and Reporting to Members

1. Increased capacity for direct services accrued.
2. Increased access to products and services not otherwise readily available.
3. Increased access to larger pool of resources.
4. Increased linkages with resources outside of the collaborative.

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